



FACT SHEET

Key Facts About the Flu:

How to Prevent the Flu and What to Do If You Get Sick

What is the Flu?

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. While most healthy people recover from the flu without complications, some people, such as older people, young children, and people with certain health conditions, are at high risk for serious complications from the flu.

Be Aware of Common Flu Symptoms

The flu usually starts suddenly and may include these symptoms:

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Tiredness (can be extreme)
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Body aches
- Diarrhea and vomiting also can occur, but are more common in children.

These symptoms are referred to as “flu-like symptoms.” A lot of different illnesses, including the common cold, can have similar symptoms.

Know the Risk from the Flu

Some of the complications caused by the flu include bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, and worsening of chronic medical conditions, such as congestive heart failure, asthma, or diabetes. Children and adults may develop sinus problems and ear infections.

Know How the Flu Spreads

The flu spreads in respiratory droplets from coughing and sneezing. It usually spreads from person to person, though occasionally a person may become infected by touching something with virus on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

Adults may be able to infect others **1 day before** getting symptoms and up to **7 days after** getting sick. So it is possible to give someone the flu before you know you’re sick as well as while you are sick.

Prevent the Flu

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each fall (see www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/keyfacts.htm), but there are other measures that can help protect against the flu.

Antiviral Medications

Three antiviral drugs (amantadine, rimantadine, and oseltamivir) are approved for use in preventing the flu. These are prescription medications, and a doctor should be consulted before they are used.

Habits for Good Health

These steps may help prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses like the flu:

- **Cover your nose and mouth** with a tissue when you cough or sneeze—throw the tissue away after you use it.
- **Wash your hands often with soap and water**, especially after you cough or sneeze. If you are not near water, use an alcohol-based hand cleaner.

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- **Stay away as much as you can from people who are sick.**
- **If you get the flu, stay home from work or school.** If you are sick, do not go near other people so that you don't make them sick too.
- **Try not to touch your eyes, nose, or mouth.** Germs often spread this way.

Diagnosing the Flu

There are tests that can determine if you have the flu as long as you are tested within the first 2 or 3 days of illness. Also, a doctor's exam may be needed to tell whether you have another infection that is a complication of the flu.

What to Do If You Get Sick

There are steps you can take if you get sick with the flu.

Antiviral Medications

Four antiviral drugs (amantadine, rimantadine, zanamavir, and oseltamivir) are approved for treatment of the flu. These are prescription medications, and a doctor should be consulted before the drugs are used. Antiviral treatment lasts for 5 days and must be started within 2 days of illness so if you get flu-like symptoms, seek medical care early on.

Other Ways to Respond to the Flu

If you get the flu, get plenty of rest, drink a lot of liquids, and avoid using alcohol and tobacco. Also, you can take medications to relieve the symptoms of the flu (but never give aspirin to children or teenagers who have flu-like symptoms, particularly fever).

If you are at high risk from complications of the flu, you should consult your health-care provider if you develop flu-like symptoms. Those at high risk for complications include **people 65 years or older, people with chronic medical conditions, pregnant women and young children**. Your doctor may recommend use of an antiviral medication to help treat the flu.

Look Out for Emergency Warning Signs

There are some "emergency warning signs" that require urgent medical attention.

In children, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Fever with a rash

In adults, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting

Seek medical care immediately (call your doctor or go to an emergency room) if you or someone you know is experiencing any of the signs above. When you arrive, tell the reception staff that you think you have the flu. You may be asked to wear a mask and/or sit in a separate area to protect others from getting sick.

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/flu, or call CDC at (800) CDC-INFO (English and Spanish) or (888) 232-6358 (TTY).

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